

## Introduction

21 March 2010

To: Commanders, Officers, NCO's and Soldiers of the 4th Infantry Division

From: Bob Babcock, 4th Infantry Division Historian

Subject: Key Battles in the History of the 4th Infantry Division –  
Battle of Suoi Tre, Vietnam – 21 March 1967

Following is the second of a series of monthly in depth articles covering major battles the 4th Infantry Division has fought in World War I, World War II, Vietnam, and Iraq. My intent is to provide detailed information about the long history of the 4ID for those 4ID Soldiers and Family members who want to learn more about those who wore the Ivy patch before you, in earlier wars and deployments.

This report covers a four hour battle fought by the 3rd Brigade (at that time made up of 2-12 IN, 2-22 IN (Mech), 3-22 IN, 2-77 FA with 2-34 AR attached for this operation) of the 4th Infantry Division on March 21, 1967, called the “Battle of Suoi Tre” or Fire Base GOLD. Working together as a combined arms team – infantry, artillery, mechanized infantry, armor, and air – the brigade routed the 272nd VC Regiment, snatching a major victory from what at one time appeared to be a major American defeat. As a result of their actions, the 3rd Brigade was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, signed by President Lyndon Johnson.

There are many reports available on this battle. Included here are reports from three sources - a Center of Military History study, a Field Artillery report, and a report from ARMOR magazine. Reading the different perspectives helps you to better understand the battle.

In the future, all of these Key Battles will be available on the 4th Infantry Division web site. In the interim, feel free to distribute these reports to all who might have an interest.

If anyone reading this has documentation or personal experiences on this or other key battles you want to share with me, please send it to [babcock224@aol.com](mailto:babcock224@aol.com). If you have suggestions on how I can improve on these Key Battle reports, please let me hear that, too.



Bob Babcock  
Historian

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## Sources

Much has been written about the Battle of Suoi Tre/FSB GOLD. Sources of the articles included in this report are included along with each of the articles. I extend my thanks to John Kapiro, Ed Schultz, and Jim Hardin for providing material from their files for use in this report and for Steve Ruhnke, 4ID Museum Director, in providing materials from his files for my use.

In addition, much additional material, including color pictures, maps, and sketches can be found on several web sites on the internet. My recommendation is to go to Google and key in, “Battle of Suoi Tre” and then look at the sites that come up.

Note: I have seen Suoi Tre also spelled Soui Tre – many accounts I have seen over the past years have misspelled the name of the battle. Until this report, I have always misspelled Suoi. Based on official documents from the Army, it appears the correct spelling is Suoi Tre.

From Ivy Leaf, March 24, 1967

## **3rd BDE Kills 596 in Four Hours 2,500-Man VC Force Dealt Stunning Blow**

Tay Ninh – Out-numbered infantrymen of the 4th Division's 3rd Brigade killed 596 members of an estimated 2,500-man enemy force in a fierce four-hour battle Tuesday morning (March 21, 1967) in Tay Ninh Province.

The Ivyemen, coupled with air strikes and artillery fire, handed the Viet Cong their worst single setback of the year and one of the worst blows of the conflict.

The clash in an egg-shaped dry rice paddy area, 300 by 400 meters, resulted in 31 Americans killed and 109 wounded.

The battalions were alerted Monday of a possible attack by Colonel Marshall B. Garth, 3rd Brigade commander, when he spotted 35 Viet Cong in the open.

He immediately notified Lieutenant Colonel John A. Bender, 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry commander, and Lieutenant Colonel John W. Vessey, 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery acting commander. Both men began preparing for the attack.

The Operation Junction City battle began at 6:40 a.m. with a mortar attack on the position of 450 men comprising the two battalions. The Viet Cong, made up of five battalions, three from the 272nd Regiment and two undetermined, launched an all-out assault at the friendly troops from three directions with the main attack coming from the south.

By 10:15 a.m. the badly battered VC were hastily withdrawing to the northeast and southeast under attack by U.S. air strikes, artillery fire, ground forces of the Ivy's 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry and armored vehicles of the division's 2nd Battalion (Mechanized), 22nd Infantry.

Two mortar rounds, landing within the friendly position, located 27 kilometers northeast of Tay Ninh City and 35 kilometers from the Cambodian border, was the ominous signal that triggered the bloody clash. Some 500 rounds of 82 and 60mm mortar fire were lobbed into the Ivy battalion's perimeter during the battle.

A security patrol was attacked while operating outside the friendly position and seven members managed to make it back inside the perimeter after alerting the battalions of the enemy's location.

The fierce, well-trained and well-equipped VC charged several times from three directions penetrating the perimeter and overrunning command posts. Each time, they were forced back by the courageous efforts of the battling Ivyemen.

The VC were able to overrun a U.S. Quad 50 position and were preparing to train the big gun on friendly forces when U.S. artillery wiped out the enemy and the weapon.

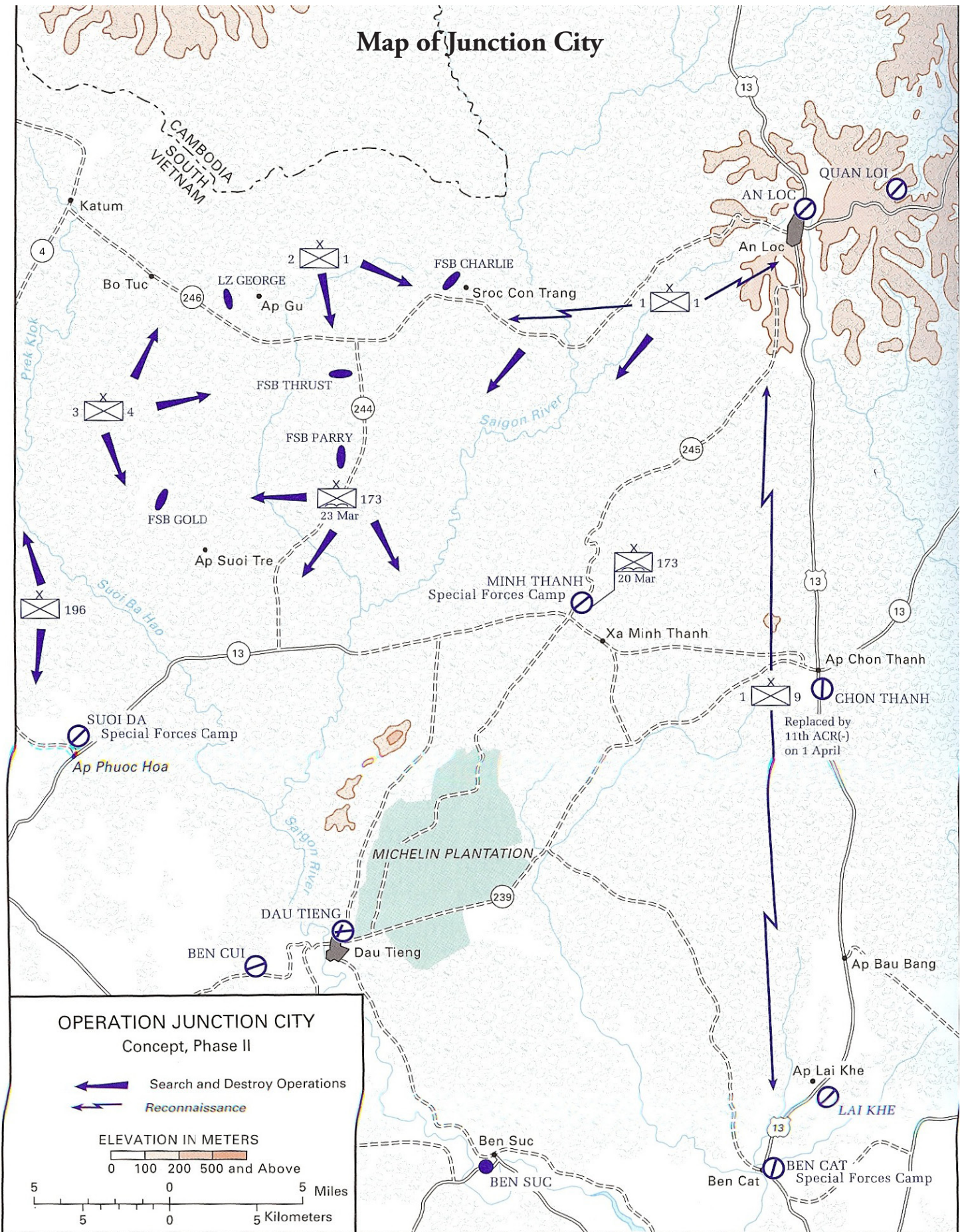
Sighting mechanisms on several howitzers were damaged by hostile fire and the cannoneers employed direct fire to repel the onrushing enemy. At times they were firing at VC within 75 meters of the guns.

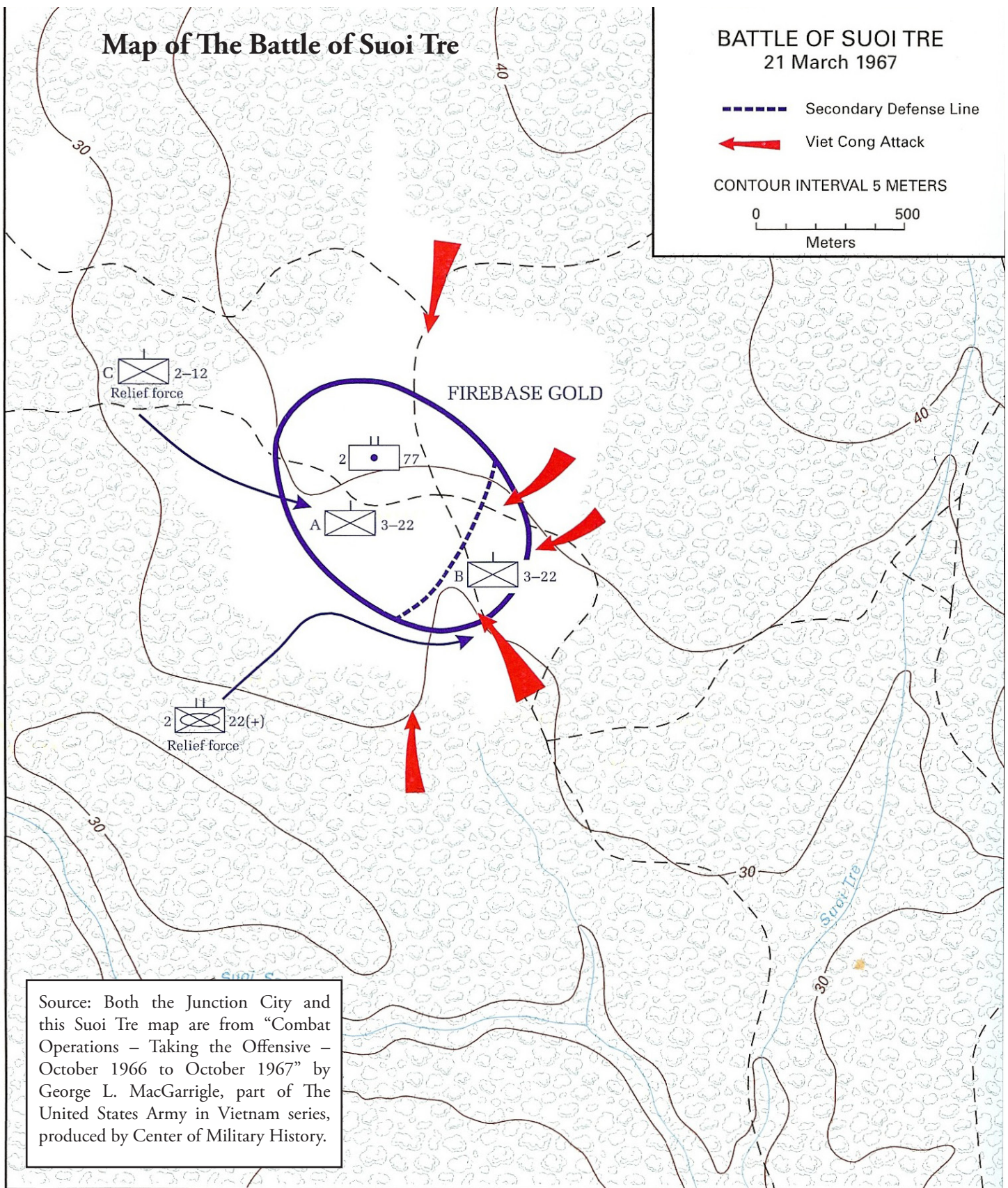
A wall of steel from supporting artillery pieces was fired within 35 meters of U.S. troops in the northeast and east area of the perimeter to turn back the swarms of charging black-clad VC. Numerous times the VC were hit, would retreat to the protection of the nearby wooded area, and shortly return bandaged up and ready for more action.

“Chinook” helicopters resupplied the U.S. troops with ammunition during the battle. The 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry had moved into the location Sunday morning by air assault and encountered small arms and automatic weapons fire.

Two artillery rounds, which were command detonated while helicopters were hovering over the prepared landing zone, destroying three aircraft. There were eight U.S. killed and nine wounded from artillery fragments and small arms fire.

The Ivymen, after Sunday's attack, were able to prepare their perimeter and all was quiet until just before dawn Tuesday.





**TEXT RETYPED FROM ORIGINAL MAP**

Annex B Enclosure II

Operation Junction City Phase II

Relief of FSB Gold 21 MAR 67

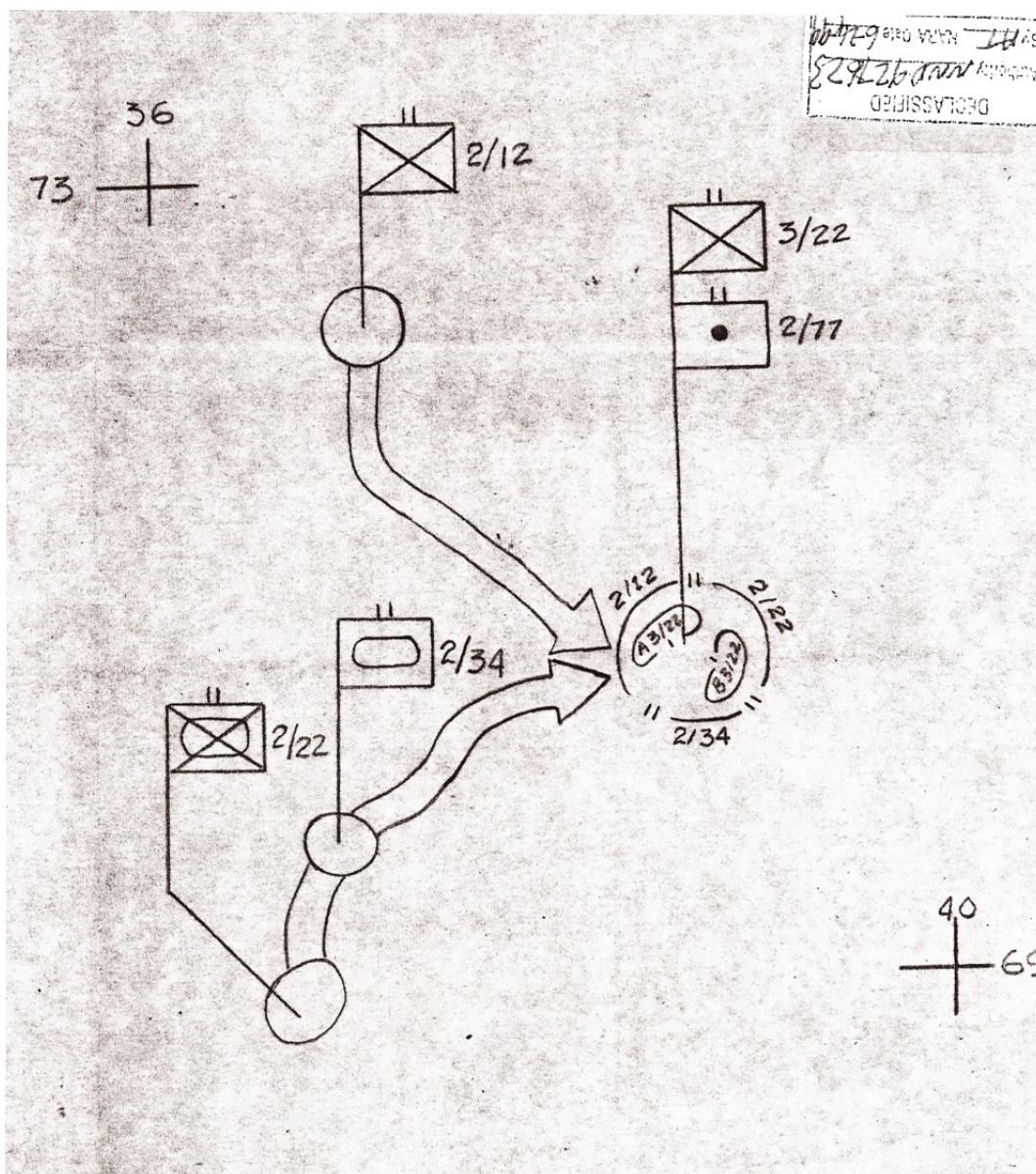
Reference Map, Vietnam 1:25,000 Series L8020

Sheet 6233 IV N, 6231 IV S, 6232 II N, 6232 II S, 6232 III N, 6232 III S, 6231 I N, 6231 I S

1- 2/34 ARMOR discovered crossing site, 2/22 INF (M) bypassed 2/34, effected a hasty river crossing, and led the relief force on the southern axis

2- Upon relief of FSB GOLD, 2/12 INF, 2/22 INF (M), 2-34 ARMOR assumed positions on perimeter.

3- A & B Co 3/22 withdrew into the perimeter as Bde reserve.



## Suoi Tre (Firebase GOLD)

*From the book, "Combat Operations – Taking the Offensive – October 1966 to October 1967" by George L. MacGarrigle, part of The United States Army in Vietnam series, produced by Center of Military History.*

Phase II of Junction City began on 18 March 1967, when the commander of the 3d Brigade, 4th Division, COL Marshall B. Garth, sent a mechanized battalion to seize a clearing designated Landing Zone SILVER, twenty-five kilometers north of Dau Tieng. The following morning he intended to airlift the remainder of his brigade, one artillery and two infantry battalions, into the clearing to establish a large firebase there, and then to sweep west toward Route 4. The operation did not go as planned. Slowed by mines and fire from RPG2s, the mechanized force came upon an uncharted stream with banks so steep that the armored personnel carriers were unable to cross. Rather than delay his main effort until the stream was forded, Garth directed the remainder of the brigade to an alternate landing zone on the morning of the nineteenth without the armored security.

After a thirty-minute artillery preparation, his first group of helicopters set down without incident. But when the second lift came in, a mine exploded among the Hueys before the troops embarked, and two more detonated as the next company landed. The explosions destroyed three troop carriers and damaged others, killing seven helicopter crewmen and ten infantrymen. Believing he already had too many men on the ground to call off the assault, Garth ordered the rest of his troops to follow, but a later search of the landing zone revealed twenty-one unexploded shells, most wired for detonation from nearby hiding places. Clearly, the Americans had been expected. But despite evidence of enemy preparation, Garth decided to build his base on the landing zone.

By the evening of 20 March the clearing, known as Firebase GOLD, contained a full artillery battalion and an infantry battalion. The 2d of the 77th Artillery (105-mm, towed) was commanded that day by the deputy commander, 25th Division Artillery, LTC John W. Vessey. The 3d of the 22d infantry, less one company, was under the command of LTC John A. Bender. In all, about four hundred fifty men defended GOLD.

Meanwhile, Garth's other infantry battalion, the 2d of the 12th Infantry, had moved from the firebase to establish a night defensive position a few kilometers to the northwest. And still to the west of GOLD, separated from the base by the stream, was the mechanized unit, the 2d Battalion, 22d Infantry, under LTC Ralph W. Julian, which by that time had gotten M48s from the 2d Battalion, 34th Armor, provided by II Field Force. Plans for the next day called for battalion sweeps to the northwest to locate a thirty- to forty-man enemy force which Garth had seen from his helicopter on the afternoon of the twentieth.

During the night of 20-21 March, Bender's listening posts reported heavy movement on GOLD's perimeter, but no assault followed. Dawn brought a sense of relief, for the enemy seldom attacked a fortified position during daylight. The feeling was premature. At 0631 the area exploded as mortar shells rained down on the startled defenders. Five minutes later, two battalions of the 272d Regiment burst from the jungle and surged toward the camp, firing machine guns, RPG2s, and assault rifles. Bender's infantrymen scrambled into their holes while the base howitzers placed high-angle fire on the suspected mortar sites. Artillery at two nearby firebases chimed in as well, laying down protective barrages all around GOLD.

Notified by Bender that he was under attack, at 0655 Garth ordered the rest of his force to GOLD. The decision was timely, for only a few minutes later Viet Cong penetrated the defensive line. While a reaction force of artillerymen contained the breakthrough, a flight of F-5 Freedom Fighters came in, slowing the advance. Other air strikes hit the eastern wood line, but the air attacks ceased when enemy fire shot down the forward air controller.

Despite heavy counterfire, the assault gained momentum. Shortly before 0800, waves of Viet Cong broke through on the southeast, converging on the artillery pieces. Lowering their tubes, Vessey's gunners fired beehive rounds with fuzes set at muzzle action, stopping the enemy instantaneously. But within minutes, another group of Viet Cong entered on the northeast. Bender order the men there to fall back and make a last stand in front of the artillery. Just then, another forward air controller arrived with several F-100 Super Sabres in tow. Air Force liaison officer MAJ Bobby J. Meyer recalled the result: "There must have been 500 of them coming at me, and this guy laid napalm right on top of them and then I didn't see them anymore." Together with direct fire from the howitzers, air power had halted the second threat.

Yet a third crisis emerged twenty minutes later, when Bender's northern sector began to crumble. Onrushing Viet Cong overran a quad .50-caliber machine gun and attempted to turn it against the defenders. An alert artillery crew spotted the threat and with a single high-explosive round destroyed the weapon. By 0840, despite a troubling ammunition shortage, the American defense, though contracted, was still intact. The momentum of the Viet Cong assault was slowing, and American reinforcements were about to arrive.

From the northwest, a company of the 2d Battalion, 12th Infantry, braved enemy mortar fire and the risk of ambushes and hacked its way through 1,500 meters of thick bamboo to reach the beleaguered camp at 0840. It charged into the base under covering fire from GOLD's defenders and assumed responsibility for the southwestern perimeter. Meanwhile, the mechanized infantry and armor had been frantically searching for a way to cross the stream that barred them from the firebase. When they found a place where the stream "disappeared" underground, they turned GOLD with the armored personnel carriers breaking trail. At 0912 the armored column burst from the jungle southwest of the base and rammed into the flank of the enemy infantry just then pulling back. With machine guns blazing and 90-mm. tank guns belching clouds of canister, the armor routed the Viet Cong, crushing many beneath their tracks. The fight was over.

Known as the Battle of Suoi Tre, after a small abandoned hamlet nearby, the four-hour struggle, coupled with the fight three weeks before at Prek Klok, devastated the 272d. Sweeps of GOLD and the nearby countryside turned up 647 enemy bodies, 94 individual and 65 crew-served weapons (50 of which were RPG2s), and 7 prisoners. The Viet Cong had abandoned nearly 600 RPG2 rounds, 1,900 grenades, and some 28,000 rounds for small arms. The finds suggested that the 272d had prepared the battle area well in advance. U.S. losses were 31 killed and 109 wounded. That the combatants had fought at close quarters was apparent from the fact that all but one of the U.S. artillery pieces had sustained damage.

## **Text of Presidential Unit Citation**

### **Taken from the award**

Award of the Presidential Unit Citation (Army) by The President of the United States of America to the following unit of the Armed Forces of the United States is confirmed in accordance with paragraph 194, AR 672-5-1. The text of the citation, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on 23 September 1968, reads as follows:

By virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States and as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States and as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States I have today awarded the Presidential Unit Citation (Army) for extraordinary heroism to:

3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division  
Brigade Command and Control Party at FSB Gold  
3rd Battalion (less Company C), 22nd Infantry  
2nd Battalion (less Company B), 34th Armor  
2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery  
2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry  
2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry

The 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division and the attached and assigned units distinguished themselves by extraordinary heroism while engaged in military operations on 21 March 1967 in Suoi Tre, Republic of Vietnam. During the early morning hours the Viet Cong 272nd Main Force Regiment, reinforced, launched a massive and determined ground attack and overran elements of the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry and 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery, located at Fire Support Base Gold near Suoi Tre, Republic of Vietnam. As the enemy penetrated the perimeter, the American troops set up an interim perimeter and continued to fire on the enemy. When the Viet Cong directed anti-tank fire upon the artillery position, heroic gun crews repaired their damaged guns and, at several points, fired directly into the advancing enemy. While the battle continued to rage and grow in intensity, the Brigade Commander was directing the 2nd Battalions of the 12th Infantry, the 22nd Infantry (Mechanized), and the 34th Armor, to the besieged fire support base. At the same time, the support and service elements of the brigade began a furious aerial resupply of ammunition and medical supplies from the brigade rear base camp at Dau Tieng. As the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, began its overland move to the fire support base, a heavy concentration of enemy mortar fire was directed upon their positions. Concurrently, mechanized and armor elements began moving across the Suoi Samat River at a ford which had only recently been located and which previously had been thought impassable. The mechanized unit, followed by the armor battalion, drove into the western sector of the engaged perimeter passing through engaged elements of the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry. Striking the Viet Cong on the flank, the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry, smashed through the enemy with such intensity and ferocity that the enemy attack faltered and broke. As the fleeing and now shattered enemy force retreated to the northeast, the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor, swept the position, destroying large numbers of Viet Cong. Throughout the battle, fighters of the United States Air Force, directed by the brigade's forward air controllers, provided close support to the fire support base and hammered enemy concentrations outside the perimeter. As the Forward Air Controller aircraft dived through heavy anti-aircraft fire to

mark enemy positions, the plane was hit by ground fire, and crashed. After securing the fire support base, a sweep of the area was conducted, revealing a total of 647 Viet Cong bodies and 10 enemy captured. It is estimated that an additional 200 enemy were killed as a result of the aerial and artillery bombardments. Friendly casualties were extremely light, resulting in only 33 killed and 187 wounded. Through their fortitude and determination, the personnel of the 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and attached units were able in great measure to cripple a large Viet Cong force. Their devotion to duty and extraordinary heroism reflect distinct credit upon themselves and the Armed Forces of the United States.

**Daily Staff Journal or Duty Officer's Log**  
**DA Form 1594**  
**HHC, 3rd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division**  
**Period covered: 0001 Hours 21 Mar 67 to 2400 Hours 21 Mar 67**  
**Battle of Suoi Tre**

Item #	Time	Incidents, Messages, Orders, Etc.
1	0050	Negative Sit Rep all units
2	0150	Neg sit rep all units
3	0250	Neg sit rep all units
4	0310	Neg sit rep (Note – between Div Commo and Div message center, our sit rep was lost – was relayed via land line at 0300)
5	0350	Neg sit rep – all units
6	0435	FALCON 3Y reported that B39 has movement to front and are ready to fire. (Editor's Note: Falcon is 3-22 IN)
7	0450	Neg sit rep – all units
8	0550	Neg sit rep – all units
9	0640	2/22 stand to complete 0630
10	0640	2/77 receiving mortar attk
11	0642	3/22 receiving ground attk from west & SE – REQUEST FAC ASAP
12	0646	3/22 (S-3) heaviest attk from SE – apparently attk from West was diversion – firing defcons – request air asap Have unk Casualties, some OPs not in yet.
13	0652	3/22 (S-3) Have Fac come up on Bde Freq
14	0654	3/22 (S-3) Both patrols laying low – primary attk is from SE & SW
15	0656	3/22 (S-3) walking arty in – some VC in camp
16	0704	3/22 (S-3) to Flex 6 – about two VC in base at this time
17	0706	Receiving penetration from south
18	0707	A/3/22 patrol hit – apparently surrounded
19	0710	Transmission out – 25th Div rec'd a pene south side of perimeter and one patrol is being hit. Unit appears to be surrounded.
20	0715	2/12 has one element moving at this time
21	0715	2/12 dust off requested for 2 litter 6 ambulatory NOTE: casualties were result of counter-mortar fire
22	0655	Transmission out – 2/12 move your unit to LZ Gold at once
23	0720	Light fire team on station at this time
24	0730	3/22 receiving mortar fire
25	0740	3/22 VC has renewed attack
26	0745	2/22 C & Recon element on the move at this time

4TH INFANTRY DIVISION'S MAJOR BATTLES

27	0745	2/77 FAC aircraft just crashed
28	0746	2/12 Co. A dptd for 3/22 area Tropic 60A FAC 300 Southeast XT387700.
29	0751	3/22 has completed been penetrated.
30	0806	2/77 VC are in A Btry position
31	0815	2/34 still working crossing site
32	0816	3/22 have been penetrated on the north flank
33	0820	2/12 have reached rear security of VC – pushing to your area.
34	0826	2/22 Co C still trying to find crossing site.
35	0836	2/77 3 guns knocked out in B Btry & 1 gun in A Btry
36	0846	2/22 lead element 300 meters SW of LZ Gold
37	0855	2/22 lead element 100 meters from psn 2/12 in front traveling on 100 degrees.
38	0900	2/22 has C & A & Recon moving into psn.
39	0905	2/22 a lot of VC moving to the NW of the psn.
40	0911	3/22 there is heavy resistance to the north of the psn.
41	0915	2/77 A group of VC moving from the SE of psn.
42	0925	3/22 have reestablished northern portion of perimeter still meeting heavy resistance.
43	0929	Air strike at 400703.
44	0929	3/22 & 2/77 need small arms fire & HE ammo.
45	0931	CO on the ground. VC appear to be withdrawing to the east and NE.
46	0933	2/34 element moving at this time.
47	0938	3/22 Sit Rep northern portion has been reestablished Western portion still receiving sporadic fire.
48	0958	2/34 lead element tied in to rear element of 2/22
49	1006	CO have about 6 POW's and a few wounded Have direct hits on arty ammo, ammo exploding. Keep air strikes to the NE, East & SE
50	1030	Ammo convoy moving toward bridge psn 1/8 Arty
51	1034	CO 3rd Bde – wounded VC are wearing khaki shirts and black pants; no identification on individuals. Some machine guns & AK-47's
52	1035	2/22 have two POW's
53	1044	Dustoff have evacuated approximately 61 personnel from forward area.
54	1051	3/22 have 1 VC WIA dusted off to hospital.
55	1115	Transmission out – 25th the following are approximate US casualties – 3 KIA, 71 WIA
56	1154	Transmission out – 3/22 COL Bender has been designed as chief coordinator on LZ Gold.
57	1155	3/22 casualties for the following units HQ 3 KIA, 8 WIA A 7 KIA, 9 WIA

58	1215	B 7 KIA, 15 WIA, 10 MIA Co C 2/22 - 99 VC KIA (Body Count)
59	1229	2/12 - first dustoff effected.
60	1258	3/22 change in casualty status HQ +1 WIA A No change B +2 KIA -7 MIA + 2 WIA Co. A location - 30 VC KIA
61	1304	2/12 dustoff complete
62	1200	Delayed entry - broke contact at 1200 hours
63	1333	2/12 casualties 1 KIA, 23 WIA Of WIA - 21 evacuated, 2 returned to duty
64	1348	2/22 - Recon platoon, Platoon Co C en route to downed O-1 approximately 250-300 meters from location. All other elements psn Gold.
65	1405	2/22 - Recon platoon received 1 round RPG-2 vic XT387697, round did not hit APC - negative damage, negative casualties. Recon platoon now at downed O-1.
66	1410	25th Div. EOD will depart T.N. at 1430 arr at LZ Gold 1445
67	1430	3/22 casualty figures HQ 3 KIA 9 WIA A 7 KIA 15 WIA 3 remain at unit B 11 KIA 18 WIA 3 MIA
68	1437	2/22 O-1A destroyed and bodies (FAC) being evacuated to LZ Gold.
69	1500	2/22 Recon & C Co platoons closed LZ Gold w/ FAC bodies.
70	1510	2/22 Inspection FAC aircraft show bullet holes 4-5 feet from tail. Cannot determine cause of crash.
71	1550	2/22 Recon dpt
	1615	Transmission out - 25th Div Interim Report 420 VC Body Count 150 Weapons AK-47 Heavy MG, rifle, RPG II (9) 6 POW's 1008 rounds fired by C/1/8 Arty 13 air strikes Friendly forces losses

	KIA	WIA	MIA	EVAC
2/12	1	23		21
2/22		2		
3/22	21	44	3	37
2/77	8	44		21
USAF	2			
TOTAL	32	113	3	79

Enemy size of attack regimental size.

4TH INFANTRY DIVISION'S MAJOR BATTLES

72	1710	From 2/34 AR C/2/34 AR found 4 – 81mm mrtr psn (US) 1-81 rd, .51mm rounds at XT396705
73	1725	2/34 AR at XT394700, found 1-81mm mrtr psn, 3-60mm rounds, 4-57 RR rounds,, 1-4.2 in round, 70 fuze containers
74		Delayed entry – 2/77 Arty fired 40 beehive rounds.
75	1746	Fighter 32 – vicinity XT 385725 – noticed movement and new positions – contacted 3/22
76	1755	Recon 2/22 returned to 2/22 location.
77	1800	Sabre A6 reported his element received small arms fire 800 southwest of this location – no casualties – will notify when his elements close this location.
78	1830	A/3/4 Cav closed at FSB Bronze
79	1920	Dustoff requested for A 4/23 at XT 388626 – 5 litter patients.
80	1945	Fullback 6 (2-22) say there is confusion in support (POL) for attached units and parent units. Please clear with 14 & 4. (Editor's Note: Fullback is 2-22 IN)
81	1955	All units neg sit rep.
82	1945	(delay) Dustoff complete 4/23
83	2000	3-4 CAV reported light at ground level – took under fire – light went out.
84	2000	2/12, 2/22 acknowledge order
85	2005	Notified Division of CP locations of units 2/12 XT 383704 3/22 Same as last 2/34 XT 392706 2/22 XT 389707
86	2011	2/34 received casualties from def con – will keep advised.
87	2040	Dustoff requested through Piston for Dreadnaught (2/34) 1 KIA, 1 WIA from friendly def cons.
88	2050	Neg sit rep from all elements
89	2110	Dustoff complete for 2/34
90	2120	Notified units of laundry change
91		Delayed entry: Rounds fired in support of defense of FSB Gold:
		Unit            Type            Rounds
		2/77 Arty    105mm        2200 HE – 33 beehive
		C/1/8 Arty   105mm        1008 HE
		B/3/13 Arty  155mm        357 HE
		B/2/35 Arty  155mm        357 HE
		B/2/32 Arty  175mm        20 HE
		8 inch         22 HE
		Total            3964 HE
		Also conducted 14 air strikes with assorted ordnance.
92	2143	Total body count as of tonight – 596 VC (100 credited

		to air). Another 200 probable VC killed due to air & arty 5 VC Bn's, 4, 5, 6th Bns 272 Regt plus 2 unidentified Bn's (Reinforced regiment).
93	2150	Falcon C, 2/34, 3-4 neg sit rep
94	2203	A/34 - message sent to 3-4 - convoy depart SD at 0800 hrs for TN - total 23 vehicles ETR 1500 hours
95	2250	Neg sit rep - all units
96	2250	2/22 acknowledged frag order
97	2345	Neg sit rep - all units
98	2400	Journal closed.

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
HEADQUARTERS 3D BRIGADE  
4TH INFANTRY DIVISION  
APO US FORCES 96263

AVDDC-C

31 March 1967

SUBJECT: Lessons learned "Battle of Suoi Tre."

TO: CG, 25th Infantry Division  
ATTN: S-3 AVDDC-C

1. 3d Bn, 22nd Infantry.
  - a. Item: "Stand to" Formation.

Discussion: In accordance with SOP the battalion conducted a 100% alert thirty minutes prior to BMNT and began a perimeter sweep to clear the area of possible infiltrators. This action probably triggered the enemy attack. At the time, the Battalion was at 100% alert and this was critical in blunting the first assault.

Observation: Conducting stand to and perimeter sweeps continues to be one of the most important security measures.

- b. Item: Conduct of security patrols.

Discussion: Around the base camp at FSB GOLD there were two reinforced squad sized ambush patrols and OP/LP positions in front of each platoon. One patrol did hear and report noise at 0435 hours which alerted the battalion. More patrols observing the enemy would possibly have fixed the avenue of approach and enabled us to spoil his attack with artillery.

Observation: Saturation patrolling is necessary for early warning. A squad size patrol from each company, OP/LP's in front of each platoon, and platoon size ambush on the primary avenue of approach is recommended.

- c. Item: Reaction force.

Discussion: The Bn reaction force consisted of the Reconnaissance platoon and elements from the 2d Bn, 77th Artillery. The enemy attack, once initiated, was vigorous and determined. There was little time for any reaction force before the base camp was heavily engaged. The reaction force had been rehearsed the night prior to the attack. They were committed and were able to blunt one penetration and reestablish the perimeter.

Observation: A ready reaction force proved to be a vital asset. To be effective they must be rehearsed and available with equipment immediately at hand. Areas of responsibility and signals must be rehearsed.

d. Item: Planned artillery concentrations.

Discussion: Very quickly after the assault was initiated artillery concentrations were needed within 30 meters of the perimeter. There was some delay in getting this fire as there were no preplanned fires this close.

Observation: Preplanned fires should be planned within 30 meters of the defensive perimeter. Preplanned fires should be adjusted as close as troop safety permits during initial organization of the defense and even closer concentrations should be plotted and on call.

2. 2d Bn, 12th Infantry.

a. Item: Fire coordination between units closing during relief of area under attack.

Discussion: During movement to FSB GOLD on 21 March 67 it was necessary for the land element of 2/12 Inf to shift from its original course during final phases of units closing. There was some difficulty encountered in coordinating fires as the reinforcing elements closed on FSB GOLD.

Observation: Aerial observers can eliminate problems of fire coordination. It is advisable to have one per battalion.

b. Item: Use of established trails during movement to provide relief to units under attack.

Discussion: Upon receipt of warning order to provide a force to reinforce units under attack at FSB GOLD on 21 Mar 67, 2/12 Inf formed to move out. The battalion perimeter then came under attack by indirect fire from VC mortars (at that time it was of undetermined origin). Co C moved out immediately by the most direct route, avoiding established trails. They were followed by the remainder of the battalion. Co C encountered sniper and mortar fire enroute to FSB GOLD but did not meet a large enemy force. By avoiding established trails, units of 2/12 Inf were not effectively blocked in moving toward FSB GOLD. There is every indication from the mortar attack just when the battalion started to move that the enemy had located the 2/12 Inf and had anticipated their attempt to reinforce. If an enemy blocking force was used, they were not in the heavy jungle but were on the main avenues of approach. They were not able to significantly delay or block the advance of 2/12 Inf.

3. 2d Bn, 77th Artillery

a. Item: Artillery Inner Perimeter.

Discussion: Even with Infantry support around the artillery element, an inner perimeter is developed within the infantry perimeter. This inner perimeter consists of fighting holes close to the howitzers and the FDC bunkers. This perimeter is not manned, but is available in case of ground attack for the artillerymen to fight from and protect their howitzers and FDC.

Observation: When the infantry was hit by the mass assaults, the inner perimeter gave the infantry a second position to fall back to. At the inner perimeter the artillerymen were also available

to beef up the fighting line. Use of the howitzers in direct fire could also be effected when the inner perimeter was manned.

b. Item: Use of Beehive in Direct Fire.

Discussion: After coordination between the infantry security and the artillery, the time came when the need for beehive was essential to hold the enemy. The Infantry had fallen back to the howitzer positions or taken cover into their own foxholes to avoid the blast and the flechettes. Because of the close range of the enemy waves the fuzes were set at muzzle action.

Observation: The beehive round was extremely effective at stopping the assaulting enemy troops. Later there were numerous bodies found that had been killed by the flechettes of the beehive round. It stopped everything in its path. An after action was the preparation of preplanned beehive concentrations for all howitzers. If the infantry and the individual howitzer sections had the data for these concentrations, they would have called for them. Reaction time would have been reduced.

c. Item: Artillery Reaction Force

Discussion: The artillery battalion had two (2) reaction forces of 10-15 men each for use in strengthening the perimeter, both were needed. During the attack both reaction forces were committed to strengthen the infantry perimeter. Everyone on the reaction force must know the signal to assemble, where to assemble, and exactly how to maneuver out to the weakened portion of the perimeter.

Observation: Rehearsals are essential in the assembly and deployment of the reaction force and the reaction force was rehearsed the evening before the attack of LZ GOLD. This rehearsal proved invaluable as both the assembly and deployment went very swiftly and smoothly. Also each group should be armed with several M-79 Grenade launchers and numerous hand grenades as both proved invaluable in holding off the assaults.

d. Item: Placement of Artillery for Mutual Support.

Discussion: Each artillery position should have artillery within range to support that position. The mutually supporting units can fire in the defensive concentrations on each other, fire the counter-mortar targets for each other, and fire in general support in case of ground attack.

Observation: The 105mm Howitzer battery within supporting range of the FSB provided the primary artillery support, firing nearly 1100 rounds in less than four hours with most of it in the first 90 minutes. It was instrumental in the defense of the artillery position, and may have been the extra punch needed to prevent an enemy penetration.

e. Item: Shields of the 105mm Howitzers.

Discussion: Because of the air-mobile concept in the movement of 105mm howitzers, shields have been removed to reduce the weight. During the attack on the artillery position the howitzers proved to be a prime target for the enemy. Both recoilless rifle rounds and small arms fire were used

very extensively against the howitzers. Had the shields been on the howitzer, the crewmen would have been afforded more protection and there would have been fewer friendly casualties.

Observation: The extra weight involved with keeping the howitzer shields attached can be compensated for by leaving back several non-essential items of equipment. This policy has been initiated and one lift with shields has been made with no problems.

f. Item: Use of hand grenades and grenade launchers (M-79) in fighting off an attacking force.

Discussion: The most effective small arms weapon in stopping the attacking force was the M-79 grenade launcher. Hand grenades were also very effective. The terrain was extensively furrowed hence the enemy had natural cover in his approach on our position. The grenade launcher and hand grenades were used very effectively against the attacking enemy.

Observation: The small arms basic load of ammunition for

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h. Item: Storage of ammunition adjacent to howitzers.

Discussion: All ammunition in an artillery position should be broken down and stored at the howitzer positions. Under heavy attack, it is very difficult to get to an ammunition storage area. The ammunition should also be placed in a bunker for protection. Much of our ammunition was ruined by fire and several rounds detonated at the gun positions.

Observation: As quickly as an ammunition resupply comes in it should be stored at the howitzer positions. Bunkers with overhead sandbag cover should be constructed at each position to protect the ammunition.

#### 4. 2d Bn 22d Infantry & 2d Bn 34th Armor:

Item: Speed and shock action in the attack.

Discussion: Once the enemy had committed himself to the battle, the reinforcing armor and mechanized forces were employed with as much speed as possible. They entered FSB GOLD taking full advantage of their speed and shock action.

Observation: The tactic of firepower and shock action was again proved effective as all the mechanized elements were brought into use and none were neutralized despite the number of anti-tank weapons available to the enemy. (Over 50 RPG-II weapons and nearly 1100 rounds of ammunition).

#### 5. General.

a. Item: Reinforcement time.

Discussion: Once ordered to move to reinforce FSB GOLD, the members of the reinforcing battalions (2/12 Inf, 2/22 Inf (M), and 2/34 Armor) pressed to the attack without allowing their elements to get sidetracked, slowed down, or engaged with enemy delaying actions.

Observation: The aggressiveness of the Battalion Commanders in moving to the scene of the battle enabled the Brigade to turn a well fought defensive action into a timely offense and substantial victory.

## 6. Summary.

With the exception of some techniques in the use of the Beehive round, there were no new or startling lessons learned as a result of the Battle of Suoi Tre. Rather, the value of the essentials of pre-planning, rehearsing, preparing positions, and proper training to insure that every man can properly accomplish his assigned mission constitute the lesson of the Battle of Suoi Tre. The principles of Security, Surprise, Mass, and the importance of commanders at all levels remaining mission oriented are as applicable in guerilla warfare as in conventional warfare.

HEADQUARTERS 3D BRIGADE  
 4TH INFANTRY DIVISION  
 APO San Francisco 96268

AVDDC-A

29 March 1967

1. Significant enemy weapons and ammunition captured during the battle of Suoi Tre:

a. WEAPON	NUMBER CAPTURED
RPG-2	50
LMG	30
AK-47	49
US Browning Auto Rifle	13
US M-14	5
SKS Carbine	12
Chicom 7.92 Rifle	13
US M-79 Grenade Launcher	2
US 12-guage shot gun	3
Pistol P-38	3
US Rifle, M-1	10

b. AMMUNITION

- 31,000 rounds of small arms ammunition
- 1,900 stick grenades
- 580 rounds of RPG-2 ammunition
- 40 rounds of 75mm Recoilless Rifle ammo
- 28 rounds of 57mm Recoilless Rifle ammo
- 21 DH-10 claymore mines
- 8 DH-2 claymore mines

2. Intelligence summary of enemy situation at time of the battle:

a. Approximately 2,300 pounds of assorted Viet Cong equipment and web gear were collected and destroyed during an after-battle police of the battle area.

b. Based on information from captured documents and statements from prisoners of war, it has been determined that 3d Brigade forces were attacked by the 272d main force Viet Cong Regiment and two additional Viet Cong battalions. This attack was supported by elements of the U-80 Artillery Regiment. Prisoner of war interrogation reports revealed the average strength of each battalion to have been approximately 400 men. The attacking VC force was well armed and possessed large quantities of ammunition. Captured weapons were in excellent operating condition, and in many instances, were new.

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...heavy cloud cover, to begin the tedious and dangerous task of resupplying ammunition to the engaged units. At FSB Bronze, the primary support base for FSB Gold, the first resupply of howitzer ammunition was airlifted in minutes before the land on-hand round was slammed into the breach of a howitzer of C Btry, 1st Bn, 8th Arty.

13. By 1145 hours the intensity of the fight had tapered off and there remained only the slow task of clearing the battlefield. The scope of the battle was so vast that five days later security and ambush patrols from FSB Gold found weapons and bodies, and captured wounded prisoners up to 1500 meters away.

14. In just over five hours of intense fighting the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division used the following amounts of ordnance:

2/77 Arty	2,200 rounds of 105mm HE 40 rounds of 105mm Beehive
C, 1/8 Arty	1,008 rounds of 105mm HE
B, 3/13 Arty	357 rounds of 105mm HE
B, 2/35 Arty	357 rounds of 105mm HE
B, 2/32 Arty	22 rounds of 175mm 20 rounds 8 inch

7th Air force (14 immediate missions consisting of 31 sorties along the perimeter of FSB Gold, additional missions were flown in pursuit of the withdrawing Viet Cong).

15. The infantry units in contact used approximately 90% of two basic loads, carried by all units, of small arms ammunition, grenades, claymores, 81mm and 4.2 inch mortar ammunition.

16. Total U.S. casualties for the battle of Suoi Tre were 31 KIA and 187 wounded in action, 92 of which were evacuated. The remaining wounded were treated on the scene and returned to duty. By mid-afternoon of 21 March all U.S. personnel were accounted for with none missing or captured.

17. Enemy killed numbered 647 by body count. Ten prisoners, to include one prisoner found two days later, were captured. Two of the prisoners later died of wounds. From the patrol reports of the 3d 22d Infantry and interrogation of prisoners and defectors, it was conservatively estimated that at least 200 more of the enemy were killed and evacuated.

## **2/77th Arty - The Battle of Suoi Tre**

The most significant combat action during Operation JUNCTION CITY took place around Fire Support Base GOLD, 17 miles northwest of Tay Ninh. The fire base was occupied jointly by the 3d Battalion, 22d Infantry, of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, and the headquarters and all firing batteries of the 2d Battalion, 77th Field Artillery.

At 0640 on 21 March (1967) infantry patrols sweeping the area around GOLD made contact with elements of a Viet Cong force apparently preparing to attack the base. The contact prematurely triggered the enemy attack which began with heavy fire from recoilless rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and 60-mm and 82-mm mortars.

At 0715 the Viet Cong launched a coordinated ground assault from the east, southeast and north with elements of five battalions under the control of the 272d Viet Cong Regiment. So violent was the assault that the enemy carried portions of the perimeter, but actions by the field artillery turned the tide. All batteries of the 2d Battalion, 77th Field Artillery, commanded by LTC John W. Vessey, engaged the enemy with over 1,000 rounds in direct fire including 30 rounds of Beehive, the largest number of these rounds fired in a single engagement to date. At the same time three batteries within range added their fire. The batteries included Battery C, 1st Battalion, 8th Field Artillery (105-mm Towed), to the south which delivered more than 1,000 rounds; Battery B, 3d Battalion, 13th Field Artillery (155-mm SP), which delivered almost 400 rounds; and a composite 8-inch and 175-mm battery from II Field Force Artillery to the south which provided additional support. Further fire support was provided by Air Force tactical air.

During the attack two maneuver battalions of the 3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, were rushed to the scene, catching the enemy forces as they were attempting to withdraw and inflicting further casualties. The action in and around GOLD resulted in 635 Viet Cong killed (confirmed by body count) and seven captured with 65 crew-served weapons and 94 individual weapons. US losses were 31 killed and 109 wounded. The action was given the name Battle of Suoi Tre after the fact.

Source: Vietnam Studies: Field Artillery 1954-1973

**The Battle of Suoi Tre:**

**Viet Cong Infantry Attack on a Fire Base Ends in Slaughter when Armor Arrives**

By First Sergeant Christopher P. Worick

*Armor Magazine, May-June 2000*

**Prelude**

In 1967, the troop buildup in Vietnam was in full swing with no end in sight. American commanders, by then equipped with more personnel and supplies, decided to revise the overall strategy of local containment for a more aggressive approach. Combined arms operations would now venture farther into enemy-held territory in an attempt to draw the communist forces into battle.

Operation Junction City, the largest combined arms operation to that date, began on February 22, 1967. The operation was designed to disrupt the Viet Cong Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN), destroy the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces, and clear War Zone C, III Corps Tactical Zone base areas in the northern Tay Ninh Province. Junction City would reinforce the necessity for armor and cavalry for the remainder of the war.

The initial phase of Junction City kicked off with airmobile troops lifted into the northwest corner of the operational area near the Cambodian border. The mission was to establish fire support bases for the follow-on infantry and establish a horseshoe blocking position. With this in place, mechanized forces began their attack north into the open end of the horseshoe toward the U end of the position. Initial enemy contact was sporadic; but mechanized units found VC base camps, hospitals, bunker systems, and small groups of Viet Cong. Dense jungle and enemy mines made progress slow for the armored forces.

Upon reaching the northern limit of advance, the mechanized units wheeled west to squeeze the enemy. Feeling the pressure, VC resistance began to stiffen until they were finally drawn out in an attempt to boost their sagging fortunes.

The last significant engagement involving the use of armor during Operation Junction City occurred at a remote fire base on March 21, 1967. It would become know as the Battle of Suoi Tre or Fire Support Base Gold. The shock effect of armor would turn an enemy victory into a disastrous defeat.

**If You Build It, They Will Come**

On March 19, 1967, almost a month into the operation, the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry (-) and the 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery (-) began airlifting three batteries of 105mm howitzers and about 450 troops into an egg-shaped clearing near the former village of Suoi Tre. Their mission was to establish Fire Support Base Gold and provide indirect fire support for the 4th Infantry Division's 3rd Brigade Task Force. This particular area had been quiet thus far and heavy action was not expected. When the first helicopters set down in the LZ, it became obvious that something was different. Viet Cong

scouts, waiting in the surrounding woods, had placed command detonated mines facing inward in the clearing. The detonation of these explosives destroyed three Hueys. Undeterred, the Americans continued to secure the perimeter and establish the fire base, despite the fact that an unusually large number of VC were spotted moving in the area.

What American troops did not know was that they had landed virtually on top of approximately 2,000 Viet Cong troops spearheaded by the 272nd Main Force Regiment of the 9th Viet Cong Division. Disturbed by this sudden threat, the enemy observed the Americans for the next two days while formulating their plan of attack. Feeling that the odds were in their favor on account of their numerical superiority, the VC would use speed and surprise to overwhelm the Americans. By using human wave assaults to quickly move in close to the defenders, they would deny US forces the ability to use their technological advantage.

At FSB Gold, the infantry and artillery men continued to reinforce and improve their perimeter defenses. They build defensive bunkers, rehearsed contingency plans, conducted ambush patrols, and constructed 18 firing positions for the artillery batteries. To the southwest of FSB Gold were elements of the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, the tank-mech infantry task force of 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry (Mechanized) and the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor (-).

Under the command of LTC Raymond Stailey, 2-34 Armor had moved north on 20 March as part of the 3rd Bde, 4th ID Task Force, commanded by COL Marshall Garth. The TF had been placed under operational control of the 25th Infantry Division for Junction City. 2-34 Armor had been conducting search and destroy operations, which consisted of clearing 10 x 10 kilometer quadrants, looking for any sign of the VC. On March 20, 1967, COL Garth ordered 2-34 AR to link up with 2-22 IN (Mech), commanded by LTC Ralph Julian, and continue their push north as a combined arms team toward the Suoi Samat River. Earlier that afternoon, the scout platoon of 2-22 Infantry had cleared a trail 1500 meters to the north but had been unable to locate a ford. The recon platoon from 2-34 AR would have better luck in the search.

Arriving ahead of the main body at the river, the 2-34 AR scouts found that the dry season had reduced the river to a muddy stream. A possible fording site had been located at a bend in the river; however, bridging assets would still be required in order to get vehicles across without getting stuck. LTC Stailey met with his scouts at the river and coordinated for an M113 to be sunk in the river and two AVLBs set across if the situation required it. This contingency plan was then passed along to all maneuver elements. Separated from the firebase by only two kilometers, LTC Stailey felt confident that if any trouble should occur, his units were in a good position to provide support. Exchanging information with the firebase commander on the task force net, LTC Stailey received the troop disposition at Gold and the extent of the outer perimeter's location. With darkness approaching, 2-22 IN and 2-34 AR had conducted their linkup and began setting up for the night. Normally a clearing would have been preferred, but none had been located or indicated on the maps. With the rear elements closing in on their respective unit night positions, LTC Stailey briefed his commanders on the current situation: he decided to wait until first light and resume the move across the river.

1LT Denny Hollister, executive officer of A Company, 2-34 AR recalls the movement:

*The day before the battle, our unit, A/2-34 AR and 2-22 IN (Mech), made little progress due to the heavy jungle and various breakdowns, mainly thrown tracks. By this time, our tanks, which were old when we got them, had sustained months of mine and RPG damage. Also, the daily routine of bulldozing the jungle was beginning to take its toll. Throwing a track (especially off a vehicle that was already short tracked due to mine damage) often meant that everything was wedged in a tree or other jungle growth. The process of repairing it was very labor-intensive, as only a tanker can understand. As a result of all this, we did not make our assigned objective that day. Since our objective was mainly just driving around in the woods until we ran into someone, it really didn't matter in the overall scope of the war but it sure did upset (COL Marshall Garth). As a punishment, we did not receive any fresh water that evening.*

## **First Blood**

Around 0600 the next morning, radio reports indicated possible enemy movement on the perimeter of the Fire Support Base. First contact with the enemy was at 0631. An ambush patrol from B Company, 3-22 IN, located 500 meters from the perimeter of Gold, broke down their ambush site when they spotted two VC. Taking the soldiers under fire, they discovered the enemy was in the tall grass all around them. With only part of the patrol making it back to the FSB, five soldiers were left pinned down. A squad was quickly assembled to provide help, but several short bursts of Ak-47 fire indicated that any survivors had been killed. The sound of mortar rounds leaving tubes sent men diving for cover as 61mm and 82mm rounds began exploding throughout the fire support base. Within minutes, the mortar fire shifted to the western side of the perimeter.

As the enemy continued to pound the western perimeter and the artillery batteries in the center of the FSB, the tempo of the battle increased. Scores of Viet Cong troops emerged from the jungle in a three-pronged assault along the eastern side of the perimeter. Small arms, RPGs, and recoilless rifle fire peppered the defenders along the outer perimeter. As counter-mortar fire went out, the amount of incoming fire in the FSB diminished. It was only 0638, seven minutes since the ambush patrol had set off the VC attack. Immediately, it was obvious that this unprecedented daylight attack was not a small enemy force. The enemy's boldness and sheer numbers indicated that they were determined to overrun the fire support base.

While tactical air support was called in, all platoons along the eastern perimeter reported enemy in the wire. The enemy surrounded some positions, with one platoon reporting hand-to-hand combat. The Artillery Reaction Force, which had rehearsed this move the day prior, was put on standby. With his company decisively engaged, the B/3-22 IN commander called for 105mm howitzer fire as close to the perimeter as necessary. He wanted to plaster the wood line and get as many troops emerging into the open as possible. A forward air controller notified the fire base that four sorties of fighters were inbound and would be on station shortly.

Monitoring the situation from his helicopter, COL Garth ordered the armored units to move across the river in an effort to assist the embattled fire base. LTC Julian, commander of 2-22 IN (Mech), immediately ordered C/2-22 IN and an attached tank platoon from 2-34 AR to move across the river and head northwest using the trees for cover. Camping near the river the night before, a fording site was found that would not require bridging assets.

With the C/2-22 IN team on the move ahead of the TF main body, the remaining units were cranked up, waiting to move. At 0700, incoming mortar fire landed among 2-34 AR's tank positions. Although ineffective, the mortar fire caused the tanks to disperse in order to get out of the impact area. Straddling each other's tracks to clear a path wide enough for the tanks, the M113s pushed forward as fast as the jungle growth allowed. The smell of diesel smoke filled the air as the two battalions crashed through the underbrush. The mortar fire gradually tapered off, with no casualties or vehicle damage reported. Although initial progress along the trail went well, maintaining dispersion and getting all the vehicles to converge on the fording site proved time-consuming. COL Garth, anxious to get a relief column to the fire base, radioed, "If a vehicle throws a track, leave it. Let's get in there and relieve the force!"

As the mechanized forces moved toward the sound of the guns, the situation at FSB Gold deteriorated. The outer perimeter along the eastern side was collapsing. The B/3-22 IN commander called for the artillery reaction force in an attempt to reinforce the line. Additionally, he told his fire support officer to move the artillery fire to within 100 meters of the perimeter. With all three platoons fighting hand-to-hand, it appeared that the reaction force would not make it in time. Ammunition was being consumed at an alarming rate. The 3rd platoon leader reported that he had VC in the foxholes at the center of his position. Suddenly the 1st platoon leader reported that the reaction force had arrived and was counterattacking on line across his positions. For a brief moment the situation had stabilized.

At 0715, a silver Phantom jet swooped overhead, passing along the edge of the woods to the east, and pulled up to the north, followed by the thunder of ordnance exploding. The Air Force had arrived! A second F-4 repeated the lead plane's maneuver. The FAC plane could be seen circling to the southeast, directing the fighter-bombers. Then two more Phantoms appeared and dropped their loads along the eastern edge of the fire base. Trying to catch enemy troops in the open, the FAC moved some of the air strikes more closely along the southeast corner of the perimeter and to hit the VC with napalm.

By the time the planes launched their sorties, enemy mortar fire had tapered off because of continuing artillery counter-mortar fire. The VC were still shooting at the artillery positions with RPG, 75mm, and 57mm recoilless rifle fire from the wood line. The enemy raked the firebase with automatic fire as the attack on the eastern perimeter intensified.

At 0745, the FAC plane was shot down by heavy machine-gun fire and crashed into the trees beyond the fire base, killing both the pilot and observer. As the ramifications of the loss sank in, there was a lull in the air strikes until a new FAC could come on station. The battle would now take a radical turn of events.

### **Desperate Measures**

The B/3-22 IN commander directed 105mm artillery rounds, known as beehives, to be loaded immediately; the rounds had not been used previously because of their classified nature. Packed with thousands of small steel flechettes in a single projectile, a beehive could cut a wide swath in the enemy ranks. The B Company commander decided to use the beehives in the 1st platoon sector first. After telling the platoon leader to get his men under cover, the commander instructed the guns to fire toward the east and southeast. The telltale effect was immediate. Although wide gaps had been blown in the attackers ranks, more were requested along the whole eastern side. Due to a shortage of beehive rounds,

a reaction force from A/3-22 IN was requested at 0800, to reinforce the B Company infantrymen. The A/3-22 IN CO said that his 20-man force was on the move en route to Bravo's positions.

Within minutes, the reaction force linked up with B Company. Despite the best efforts of the artillery firing over the defenders heads, the VC were in scattered foxholes. More importantly, ammunition was now in short supply. With troops still emerging from the wood line, the order was given at 0820 for the eastern perimeter troops to fall back to secondary positions. Platoons began bounding back to their alternate positions in a move rehearsed the day prior. By 0840, B Company had completed its move. This allowed the artillerymen to drop the tubes and fire at point-blank range making the beehives even more effective. A Company now experienced problems of its own. The VC overran a quad .50 caliber machine gun, positioned on the northern perimeter. Attempting to turn it on the defenders, it was destroyed by a direct hit from a 105mm howitzer.

Alarmed by the radio reports at FSB Gold, the tank/infantry task force moved with all possible speed through the heavy vegetation in its attempt to relieve the base. Although sporadic sniper fire hampered their movement, they made progress. A new forward air controller arrived back on station at 0845 and coordinated more airstrikes. Helicopter gunships had also been called in to assist the defenders. CH-47 Chinook helicopters dropped fresh supplies of ammunition directly into the firebase. From his vantage point above the battlefield, LTC Stailey helped to direct his battalion's lead elements to the river from his helicopter. Calling forward the AVLBs and an M113 from the headquarters section, the contingency plan went into effect. The APC was driven to the middle of the river to act as an abutment. Once the crew was clear of their M113, the scissor bridges were set in, finally spanning the river.

As the TF main body closed on the fording site, air strikes were within 100 meters of FSB Gold. Napalm was burning up the foliage around the base that enemy troops were using for concealment. Indirect fire to hit the troops still emerging from the jungle was on hold because of the aircraft in the area. Like a swarm of ants, the VC continued to advance on the defending troops. With beehive rounds expended, the artillerymen resorted to firing HE at point-blank range. Enemy troops were within hand grenade range of the command bunker and five meters of the 3-22 IN Battalion Aid Station. Having borne the brunt of the enemy's repeated attacks, B/3-22 IN was on the verge of being overrun. A Company, under moderate pressure, still held its original positions, but in some places the VC were within 15 meters of their line.

### **Into the Maelstrom**

With C Company, 2-34 AR leading the TF main body across the suoi Samat, the 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry, had already moved up on foot and were just to the south of Gold in the wood line. C/2-22 IN, with its attached tank platoon, had also made it to the edge of the trees in good time. The situation at the fire base had rapidly gotten worse. VC soldiers continued to pour from the woods from the north and east. Unknown to the VC troops, 2-34 AR and 2-22 IN were consolidating in the wood line preparing to assault. The plan called for C/2-22 IN to attack northwest through the FSB and swing north. The task force main body would skirt the wood line moving east and emerge swinging north, immediately spreading out to have room for fire and movement. They would continue along the wood line destroying all enemy forces in order to secure the eastern perimeter and prepare for a counterattack.

As the end of the column moved up to within 50 meters of the wood line, preparing to counterattack, the defenders at FSB Gold were in dire straits. Some of the troops had begun to destroy their weapons to prevent capture. Along the B/3-22 IN sector, many troops were down to one grenade and two magazines apiece. Small pockets of men, out of ammunition, had resorted to using weapons or entrenching tools as clubs in desperate battles for survival. 2-12 IN began its attack by firing directly into the VC flank as they emerged at the southern end of the clearing. Artillery fire was immediately adjusted to prevent hitting the friendly troops. As the VC continued to advance through the smoke, a new sound was added to the chaos, growing louder from the south.

### **Fire and Maneuver**

At 0912, with canister rounds exploding among the troops in the open and machine guns blazing, the tanks and APCs broke cover of the trees and began to fan out on line, suddenly throwing the enemy off balance. Skirting the tree line toward the north, one tank crewman observed, "It was like shooting fish in a barrel". Responding to this new threat, groups of VC began to rush the vehicles but were quickly crushed by the rolling juggernaut. Others foolishly attempted to climb onto the tanks and had to be taken off with pistols, hand grenades, and even pioneer tools. Anatol Kononenko, a 4.2 mortar forward observer with 2-22 IN, observed two tanks actually fire at each other using canister rounds to remove VC troops from their tanks. PFC Gary Lapp, of C Company, 2-34 AR, was assigned as loader on C-25. Moving into the battle area, Lapp recalls the battle:

As the tanks were racing up and down the trails to get to Gold, I was down inside. The center of gravity on a tank is so high, that once it starts bucking back and forth, it is very difficult to stay up top in the loader's hatch with getting thrown around. Down inside I was having a hard time holding on to anything that would give me support. Sitting on the loader's seat with feet spread apart for directional support, my right hand was on the steel grid that protects the radios from the spent 90mm shell casings and my left hand was placed on the gun carriage. That was the best place to be. Once we broke through onto the LZ, SSG Badoyen told me to get ready. One of the prides I had in being a lowly loader, was that I knew how to keep the coax machine gun going, and I could load the main gun so fast it sounded like a semi-automatic. I remember racing across the opening for some distance before we opened fire. I also remember soldiers of the 77th Artillery, waving and cheering as we raced around them moving northeast. We had still not opened fire and were now in the clearing. I jumped up in the loader's hatch and I could see the back grill doors of three other tanks in front of us. Once I had jumped down inside to begin loading the main gun and keep the coax from jamming, I kept thinking: 'This is it, this is real combat. I wonder if an RPG will come through the front slope and kill us all? I hope SSG Badoyan has his pistol ready to keep anybody from jumping up on the tank and throwing a grenade inside.' I just kept loading that main gun and keeping the slack belts feeding into the coax. I recall the empty shell casings falling on the floor and using my boot to keep them away from the turret ring. When several shell casings stack up, they can roll into the drive gear and jam it up.

### **Fatal Blows**

Stunned by the unexpected armored onslaught, VC troops hesitated, unsure what to do next. Now fighting a threat from two directions, the only logical course of action was to withdraw before being enveloped and cut off. The VC were truly between the hammer and anvil. The majority of enemy troops were caught in the open and were cut down by direct fire before they could reach the cover of

the trees. A mechanic, aboard the A Company, 2-34 AR tank recover vehicle, sat calmly on top, filming the action with his home movie camera while the rest of the crew threw grenades and fired their .50 cal. machine gun at the fleeing enemy. With the VC on the run, artillery was immediately shifted farther east into the wood line in an attempt to kill as many enemy as possible with indirect fire. C/2-22 IN, moving through the FSB, found a VC aid station just to the north of Gold. Tying in with 2-12 IN, the armored vehicles quickly established a firing line outside the original perimeter and consolidated their combat power preparing for a counterattack.

Once it was established the VC had broken contact, treatment of the wounded and policing of the battlefield began. C/2-22 IN located the missing ambush patrol. Four of the men were dead, but one soldier had miraculously survived. Captured enemy soldiers and documents provided a wealth of information.

With 2,500 VC soldiers participating in the attack, 647 now lay dead with another 200 believed killed and dragged away. Friendly casualties included 31 KIAs and 187 wounded. Due to the large numbers of enemy dead, a mass grave was scooped out by one of 2-34 AR's M-88 recovery vehicles. Surveying the devastation, the survivors at Gold estimated that if the armor would have arrived 15 minutes later, the VC would have overrun the base.

LTC John Bender, the fire base commander commented, "It was just like the 10 o'clock late show on TV. The US Cavalry came riding to the rescue." MSG Andrew Hunter recalled, "They haven't made a word to describe what we thought when we saw those tanks and armored personnel carriers. It was divine!" For their participation in the battle, 2-34 AR (and the other participating units of 3rd Brigade of 4ID) was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation.

## **Conclusion**

The battle of FSB Gold was over but not forgotten. The VC had lost more soldiers at Suoi Tre than any other single engagement of the war. The 9th VC division, although decimated on March 21, 1967, would fight in other battles throughout the rest of the war. Once the smoke had cleared, after-action reports of the battle immediately concluded that the use of armor had turned the tide of battle in the Americans favor. Initially hesitant about using armor in the jungle, senior officers were beginning to rethink their tactics in favor of the use of combined arms teams whenever possible. The geography of Vietnam would pose special problems for armored forces. When properly employed, however, tanks and mechanized infantry proved to be a powerful combat multiplier, as was the case at Suoi Tre.

*In response to the above article from ARMOR magazine, COL (Ret) Ralph W. Julian, commander of 2-22 Infantry (Mech) during the battle wrote the following response, which was printed in the September-October 2000 issue of ARMOR magazine.*

### **Mech Commander Adds Detail About Suoi Tre Account**

Dear Sir:

I enjoyed the article on "The Battle of Suoi Tre" written by First Sergeant Christopher P. Worick in your May-June 2000 issue of ARMOR. I know it is difficult to gather first-hand detailed information

on an action after 30+ years. The author has done a fine job, all things considered. There are a few items I would like to furnish that might be of importance from my first-hand point of view as commander of the 2/22 Inf (Mech) during this operation.

The 2/22 Inf (Mech) joined up with the 2/34 Armor (-) on March 18 to cross the Bach Sohn Doi near its junction with the Soui Mat stream (editor's note – Suoi and Soui are both used as spelling for Suoi (which appears to be the correct spelling) – I will use Soui in this article, as it was printed). The Armor battalion had 18 tanks and a tank retriever (M-88), plus their headquarters vehicles. To facilitate operations, we cross-attached elements to establish the task forces as follows:

2/22 Inf (M) (-)  
     Co B, 2/22 Inf (M)  
     Co C, 2/22 Inf (M)  
     Co A, 2.34 Armor

2/34 Armor (-)  
     Co C, 2/34 Armor  
     Co A, 2/22 Inf (M)

with further internal cross attachments.

The crossing site was just north of a fire support base at Xa Loc Ninh occupied by B Btry, 2/35th Arty (155 SP) and B Btry, 2/32 Arty (8 in. and 175mm) that provided support for our operation and FSB Gold. After crossing the rivers, both task forces moved north on the west side of Soui Mat stream in column to ease passage through the dense trees with the 2/22 TF leading. We were looking for another crossing site to get on the east side of the Soui Mat as it generally ran to the northwest, away from FSB Gold. The lower end was very boggy and the AVLBs could not span this area after their initial employment. At the end of March 18, we had moved about 2,000 meters north, paralleling the Soui Mat without finding a suitable crossing site. The AVLBs used to cross the river and the lower part of Soui Mat were returned to their base as their size would pose many problems going through the heavy under-growth in the jungle and there were no identifiable sites for their immediate use.

On March 19, we continued moving north parallel to the Soui Mat and again moved about 2,000 meters conduction operations in zone and seeking a crossing site to the east without success.

March 20th saw a continuation of the move north, approximately 2,000 meters, with some skirmishes, but no success with a crossing site. The recon platoon of the 2/22 Inf (M), which had been in the lead at this time, had stopped about 1,000 meters north of our night laager and returned without finding a crossing on the Soui Mat. (Little did we know, but at that point the Soui Mat was a dry bed with firm, fairly level ground that could not be seen from the air and not readily identifiable on the ground due to the dense growth). It was planned that after stand-to the next morning, to go east from where the recon element stopped the previous night and look for another crossing site, as the jungle was so dense we could not see the meandering of the stream nor any place to cross by following its path from the air.

When the attack on FSB Gold started on the morning of March 21, I established the order of march from the laager with TF 2/22 elements leading. They were to establish a trail from the recon platoon's

northern penetration and go due east toward FSB Gold. In my command helicopter, I was able to orbit the lead vehicle and direct its travel through the least dense areas and shortest line (it was approximately 2,500 meters) to FSB Gold. All vehicles traveled in column, with the M113s widening the trail to facilitate the tanks' movement through the trees. At the same time we were moving east, the 2/12 Inf was recalled from an area northwest of FSB Gold where it had gone on an operation on March 20. On entering the clearing in the southwest corner of FSB Gold, the combined elements of 2/22 (M) and 2/34 Armor TF moved in column in a counterclockwise direction around the base to secure the SW, SE & NE sectors with the 2/12 Inf the NW sector. Once the perimeter was closed and secured, close-in operations continued, to include the retrieval of the FAC team from the airplane, about 1,000 meters south of FSB Gold, by the 2/22 Inf (M) recon platoon.

Many people have written about this operation, and there have been many variations to sort out. I hope that my comments above will aid in visualizing the operation from my viewpoint. There were many problems using tanks in the heavy jungle, as stated by 1LT Danny Hollister in the article. It was bad enough for the M113s, but the terrain dictated where you could and could not go with heavy armored vehicles vs. the M113s.

COL Ralph W. Julian (Ret.)  
Highlands Ranch, CO

HEADQUARTERS 3D BRIGADE  
4TH INFANTRY DIVISION  
APO San Francisco 96268

6 April 1967

Major General William R. Peers  
Headquarters 4th Infantry Division  
APO 96262 US Forces

Dear General Peers,

On 21 March of this year the men of the 3d Brigade carved their niche in history when they stood shoulder to shoulder and decisively defeated a determined Viet Cong force estimated to number approximately 2000 men. To date, the body count has reached 647 with another 200 probable kills and 10 captives.

I have attached a copy of the account of the battle of SUOI TRE which is in the form of a recommendation for award of the Presidential Unit Citation to the 3d Brigade. I thought you be interested in this account of the battle for your files. It had all the facets of a classic battle in that Infantry, Armor, Mechanized Infantry, Artillery, gun ships, and tactical air were employed. (John Randolph of the Los Angeles Times wrote a most interesting account of the action).

Had hopes of visiting the Division before departure, however, the Bde is extremely busy at present. Departure is scheduled for 5 May.

Best personal regards,

/signed/

MARSHALL B. GARTH  
Colonel, Infantry  
Commanding

4TH INFANTRY DIVISION'S MAJOR BATTLES

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
HEADQUARTERS, 4TH INFANTRY DIVISION  
Office of the Commanding General  
APO San Francisco 96262

18 April 1967

Dear Marshall,

Many thanks for your letter of 6 April with a copy of the recommendation for a Presidential Unit Citation attached thereto. It certainly appears well deserved and in keeping with the fine fighting spirit and tradition of the brigade.

The command relationship between the 3d Brigade and the remainder of the 4th Infantry Division is most unusual. However, as far as the Division and all of its officers and men are concerned, the 3d Brigade wears, as we do, the Ivy Patch, and we, too, take great pride in your accomplishments. For your information, we are reproducing your letter and the recommendation for the unit citation so that copies may be distributed to the several Division commands and staff agencies.

In this same sense, men of the 3d Brigade can take pride in the accomplishments of their fellow Ivymen and their combat operations in the Central Highlands. Taken as a whole, it would appear that the German comment, "Those terrible men with the ivy green patch" has much pertinence.

I would appreciate it if you would pass on to all of your personnel the feeling of pride that we have for the 3d Brigade and its accomplishments on 21 March 1967 in the III Corps area of South Vietnam. It was an outstanding success, and we all hope that the recommendation for the Presidential Unit Citation receives comparable consideration.

While your last days with the Brigade may well be busy ones, we would all hope that you would be able to arrange a visit with the Division at the Dragon Mountain Base Camp prior to your departure.

Sincerely,

/signed/

W. R. PEERS  
Major General, USA  
Commanding

Colonel Marshall B. Garth  
Commanding Officer  
3d Brigade, 4th Infantry Division  
APO 96268

## **Artilleryman Turns Infantryman To Drive Back Charging Viet Cong**

From *Ivy Leaf*, April 7, 1967

By SP4 Gary M. Silva

Suoi Da – He was an artillery gunner turned infantryman – what more can a person say? Sergeant James W. Evans (Buffalo, NY) was working as a gunner for the 2nd Battalion, 77th Artillery when the biggest battle of the Vietnam War started during Operation Junction City.

The forward base camp of the 3rd Brigade unit was hit in the morning hours (of March 21, 1967) by the tough 272nd Main Force Viet Cong Regiment with a full scale attack. Mortars were falling everywhere and enemy soldiers began running towards the American bunkers in screaming “human waves”. The Ivymen began to fight for their lives.

Sergeant Evans, a 26-year-old gunner from Battery A, was picked to work as a reactionary force to drive the advancing enemy back away from the hard hit perimeter.

His M-14 jammed and he had to work the bolt by hand as he fired into the never-ending ranks of Viet Cong.

Company B of the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry was forced to pull back, but Sergeant Evans grabbed a sandbag full of hand grenades, placed the bag in his teeth, put a grenade in each hand and started killing Viet Cong within five meters of his position.

After Company B had pulled back, Sergeant Evans found a new position with six Americans and began pouring small arms fire into the “human wave”.

He ran forward again with the sandbag clenched between his teeth and started throwing more grenades. The artilleryman held at the new perimeter until armored personnel carriers from the 2nd Battalion, 22nd Infantry reinforced the Ivymen.

But Sergeant Evans wasn't through yet. He again drove forward behind the cover of the APC's and helped in knocking out small pockets of hiding VC.

By the battle's end he had helped eight Americans to an evacuation site after they were found wounded. Sergeant Evans, an artilleryman turned infantryman for six hours.

## **Suoi Tre – FSB Gold**

### **Personal Story from Jim Hardin**

March 21, 1967 started like most. We went to 100% alert (Stand To) before dawn, then got ready for another day of patrolling. We had been doing this to the point that the days seemed to run together. As it got light I noticed there was an overcast, so maybe it wouldn't be too hot. Our squad was nearly at full strength, with 8 men and 2 Combat Engineers attached. These 2 fellows were great, they stood watches with us and helped out wherever they could. As we started to move out, we could hear a battle going on in the opposite direction. As we took position near the end of the column we couldn't find out any information as to what the battle was about. It didn't settle too well with the squad, to be driving away from a fight. Shortly the order came through to reverse direction and clear the trail so the two M48s could take the lead.

While waiting, we found out that the 3/22nd was engaged at Fire Support Base Gold and we were going to help them. By now the battle had been raging for a half hour, so we figured that it was going to be over by the time we got there, as we had done so many times before. The jungle was very heavy and the tanks were very slow. We got a message that the situation at FSB Gold was critical and we were to bypass the tanks and make trail for them. Since we started at the rear, we were now near the front of the column.

We moved around the tanks and formed a staggered column, widening the track as we pushed ahead. We ran at full throttle, clipping a few inches off the trees to widen the path for the tanks. Our V8 Chryslers were turning at redline in 2nd gear (20mph) and we were falling behind. We tried 3-4 range but after an initial burst of speed we would slow and have to drop back into 1-2 range. We had been told that slow or disabled PCs would be left behind. Our transmission was weak, but the driver (Willie) managed to keep us in the race. The jungle was getting thinner and we could see light ahead. We took some small arms fire as we ran through the VC at the edge. We fired some to the flanks, but basically ignored the incoming and just swept on through. As we entered the clearing, I was struck by the sights before me.

Artillery was pounding the flanks to the East, while at the same time I saw F-100s strafing the North side. In the middle of all of this, helicopter gunships were also strafing! Normally the Air Force won't come anywhere near supporting artillery and the gunships stay clear of close air support. Not today! A water trailer flew by, streaming water like smoke. We pulled to the far edge of the artillery positions and stopped on line to dismount.

I stopped the two Combat engineers and told them to stay on board and keep the .50 supplied. We had about 3,000 rounds of .50 but 600+ were in "spam cans". Spam cans were for quad 50s. They held 105 rounds, 5 too many to fit in a regular .50 ammo box. To compound the problem, the wrong end of the belt was on top! They had a key and opened like a can of spam, unless the tab broke, which it usually did. For a quad 50 the "wrong end" of the belt was started into the magazine and the belt cranked in to load it. We used a P38 can opener to open the bottom of them then topped off our regular ammo cans. I hit the ground, with my fire team on the left front of the PC.

When Crum (our gunner) would fire, the muzzle blast rattled me so hard that I couldn't see. I finally backed up till I was slightly behind him. I couldn't get low enough, and decided that my ammo

pouches were holding my posterior up too high. I unbuckled my web belt and pushed them to the side. With that part of my anatomy safe, I fired two 20 round magazines of grazing fire into the wood line. We were taking a lot of incoming, but I couldn't tell from where, nor did I know if any friendlies were in front of us.

It was a gamble. A squad member ran over and flopped beside me. He wanted to know if my M16 had jammed. It hadn't and I had always claimed that a properly cleaned M16 would not jam. Little did they know how I despised that black piece of junk! He looked disappointed and told me his had. We laughed like two fools, while I got out my cleaning rod to clear the stuck case. It took several tries but we finally got it to fire a whole magazine without a jam.

While doing this I noticed the two combat engineers popping up out of the cargo hatch with their M14s and firing. An artilleryman slid up beside me asking for 7.62 ammo. I apologized that all we had was linked. He didn't care, the choice was linked or none! The engineers threw out a case and off he went. He was back a minute later for grenades. Another case and off he went.

There was a large sandbagged position to my left, and I could see what looked like 10 men frantically de-linking the 7.62 belts and loading M14 magazines. As fast as they would fill a magazine, two fellows would pop up with M14 Autos and empty them! They also went through that case of grenades as fast as they could open them. Two of them started forward but one stopped and turned around when his sergeant demanded to know where he was going. He was explaining that there were still VC in a hole they had been trying to grenade.

About then an RPD light machine gun peeked out of the ground and the soldier fell. I called for a medic who came with another man from the squad to our right. No questions asked, Doc and his 'guardian' took off. As they ran to the fallen artilleryman, Doc emptied his .45 into a dead(?) VC. His 'guardian' stopped and looked, then shook his head and caught up with Doc. While Doc worked on the man the 'guardian' crawled over to the hole where two VC were hiding, and in a reverse move, pointed his M16 into the hole like a pistol and emptied it.

He pulled the RPD out and came back with Doc. He was excited with his souvenir that he wanted to take home and asked me what it was. I told him it was an RPD and I doubted that they would let him take it home. I asked Doc about the fellow he treated. He said he thought he would be OK, but the kid was recently married and worried about his wound, the bullet exited just above his family planning. As for the .45 shooting, Doc explained he was taking no chances!

By now the rest of the PCs and tanks had caught up and were on line. I saw a blur come out of the woods and fly at one of the tanks. It bounce off the turret and sailed off into the woods to explode. The PCs started moving ahead on line. We got up to move alongside but the incoming was too heavy. Our squad and the one to the right of us were left behind. VC that were hiding in the many holes and folds of the ground started to get up and run. I laughed as one PC chased a VC. The .50 was firing away, but couldn't hit him as the PC bounded along. Finally the driver caught him.

As the incoming fire dropped off, our two orphaned squads got online and moved forward. We came across pieces of a quad 50. It had been overrun and as the VC tried to turn it around, a 105 howitzer took it out! Doc's 'guardian' had stayed with a friend in my fire team, and as we paused in a small ditch,

I heard a shout to my left followed by the 'thump' of an M79. I checked and found that a VC had come around a corner in the ditch and nearly bumped into these two. The 'guardian' pulled his trigger, only to find out he was empty and let out the shout. My grenadier turned and fired his M79. Too close to arm, the half pound 40mm took off the VC's arm and most of his right shoulder.

We passed through the overrun positions of the 3/22, then turned left and started checking bodies. No one knew how to do that but we weren't taking blood pressure! We fixed bayonets and probed them. Finger on the trigger, safeties on Auto. We didn't run them through, just probed at sensitive spots to see if they flinched. At one point we came across a squad plus of VC, spread out evenly and on line. All were dead. We didn't look too closely but I guessed from the lack of apparent wounds, they had been cut down by a 105 beehive. I took an RPD from one and noticed that it was clean, oiled, and had never been fired.

The squad leader spotted a 7.62 Tokarev pistol on one VC. He wanted it but was afraid of booby traps. I can't remember the sergeant's name, but he was a huge fellow with a Swedish name. He got the pistol out of the VC's hand, then took off running. When he reached the end of the lanyard the VC owner was snapped into the air like a puppy on a leash! We laughed till tears came.

The PCs returned, Plt Sgt Kay was furious that we had stayed behind. We were furious that he had left us. He had called to mount up but we never got the word. My heart sank when I saw one of the combat engineers at the .50. Willie, the driver, wouldn't even look at me when I told him to drop the ramp. The inside was a shamble of casings, links, empty ammo boxes, spam cans and personal gear that had gotten in the way. In the front on the bench seat was Crum, pale white and without a helmet. I called Doc over. He checked him out and filled out a evacuation tag while I got the story from the combat engineers. As they were clearing the area, Crum was reloading the .50 when he fell inside. His helmet had a bullet hole in the front, with an exit hole at the rear! Crum felt his head but found only a tiny scratch. He put on the helmet and went back to work. The bullet had traveled around between the helmet and the liner to exit at the rear. After firing another box or two through his .50, the full gravity of what could have happened sank in and he slumped inside in deep shock. Doc got him evacuated, while I started barking orders to the squad to cleanup the mess. They used entrenching tools to rake out the brass and links. A Chaplin from 3/22 came by, probably attracted by my NCO language, and thanked us for coming.

I got an inventory of ammo, 300 rounds of .50 remained. That meant we went through 2,700 in less than a half hour!!! At that point we were called to reinforce recon platoon. They had gone out to recover the bodies from an L19 forward observer aircraft that was shot down during the battle. On the way they encounter the retreating VC who were still full of fight and took them on! That turned out to be a non-event but with only 300 rounds of .50 left, our pucker factor was way up there.

When we got back to FSB Gold we found that the M88 VTR from the 2/34th Armor had scooped out a mass grave. We got to do police call. I don't know who did the body count or how they counted some of the pieces I threw in but 650 seems to be about right. I saw the weapons pile aside the grave and decided that this was the time to get a few pictures. I always sent my film to be developed, then home. Since they went home, I never took any "hamburger" pictures. This day was significant, so I would break my standing rule. I reached for my camera but it was gone! Both shirt pocket buttons

were still buttoned but I managed to push the camera out when crawling around. It was inexpensive, but I hope someone found it and got some use from it.

We formed a perimeter near the edge of woods for the night. We were winding down when we got a call to take cover, they were going to detonate an unexploded bomb. There was a boom and something big landed to our front. We reported it and a half hour later we got another Fire in the Hole. This time everything went black as the concussion swept over us. Not good for our rattled nerves.

At dusk, I got tagged to take out the Listening Post. I wasn't too keen on that, we had heard that 3/22 had lost most of their LPs. I ended up with a reinforced squad, complete with an M60 and 800 rounds. We were all very edgy. As I chose a location, a trip flare went off behind us. One fellow started back toward the PCs. I got him stopped, but we gritted our teeth waiting for the .50s to open up. No one fired, even edgy they kept their wits. The VC didn't come back that night, but they sent their mosquitoes. Somehow we didn't have any insect repellent, so I passed around a can of weapons oil as a substitute.

This is about all I can remember of that day. If anyone has any pictures I would gladly pay for reproductions.

There is one other story about this battle that I haven't heard anyone mention. Many months later, I was talking to a fellow from 3/22. He said that at one point that morning a B52 made a low pass over FSB Gold. It didn't drop anything, just flew by and pulled up into the clouds. My guess is that it was a pathfinder. By flying over the battlefield and marking his position, the others could set their radar bombing controls. I suggest that this was the final option. Had FSB Gold been overrun the B52s would have been cleared in to bomb. If anyone can confirm this, one way or the other, I would like to know.

*Gary Krek, Recon, 2-22 Infantry (now deceased) was also a participant in the Battle of Suoi Tre and while answering an email inquiry from a man from 2-12 Infantry who was in the battle, Gary wrote this. (From the book, "War Stories – Utah Beach to Pleiku", Deeds Publishing)*

Port, we may have passed each other or spoke a word or two at Suoi Tre. After the perimeter was secured (loose use of words), I was in the group of three APCs who went on the rescue mission of the downed pilots from the Birdog that had been shot down earlier that morning. We ran into the retreating 272nd VC Regiment and started our own little conflict. The word was sent out for a rescue party to come to our rescue. This didn't amount to much and as soon as my crippled APC was put back into working order, we were on our way again. When we arrived back at FSB Gold with the remains of the two pilots, the VTR had already dug up the two burial sites, and the enemy were being brought to their final resting place. We stayed at Gold until after the award ceremony and moved out the next morning.

*James D. Holder, A/3-22 Infantry, wrote about his admiration for the artillery in his story from the book, "War Stories – Utah Beach to Pleiku."*

I was at the battle referred to as Suoi Tre on March 21, 1967. Our reference, as I recall was the Battle of LZ Gold. I was a squad leader of some fine men, but then that is another story for another day. I remember this battle for many reasons, but one was a newfound admiration for the men of the

artillery. I had always felt that they were not as good as infantry troops. But during the Battle of Suoi Tre, when we were informed that the enemy had penetrated our perimeter in three places, I watched the rear of our two-man position.

As I stared out there looking for the enemy, I noticed that amid the 82mm and rifle fire, the artillery soldiers from 2-77 Field Artillery were standing in the open without cover, continuing to load and fire the 105mm howitzers with beehive rounds and HE into the tree line. I saw many of these fine soldiers hit the ground one at a time and then it hit me like a rock – these men were falling from wounds. I came away that day with a newfound pride in the artillery folks, which I have maintained to this day. We had cover, they did not, yet they stayed on duty continuing to fire their weapons until they were silenced or ran out of ammo. My hat is off to the men of the artillery.

## Personal Story from Bill Comeau

Bill Comeau, 2-12 veteran of the Battle of Suoi Tre, and historian for A/2-12 IN, after reading this Key Battle report wrote:

I've read the entire story you organized on the Battle of Suoi Tre and I approve. I looked to be sure that in the story it was written that 2-12 IN was engaged as 2-22 IN (Mech) passed through our ranks to engage the enemy that morning. We arrived at 9:02 and the Mech arrived at 9:12, ten minutes later... At the time of our entry into the clearing, the defenders were very near the point of exhausting the last of their ammunition. As we swept around to reinforce the defenders on the line it was apparent that they had no idea that anyone was coming to their aid. Needless to say, they were ecstatic. We were just as happy to see 2-22 IN come busting through the eastern tree line. If you read carefully the reports, the enemy by this time was in retreat. They saw us enter the fray and their scouts must have reported the arrival of the mechanized infantry and armor in the area and they felt the jig was up. Of course the 2-22 IN and 2-34 AR caught them in the clearing. Believe me, it was a sight to see as they tore into their ranks. As they passed through our easterly forces, those men had to quickly move to get out of their way.

I spoke to the commander of C/2/12 by phone in October 2009 and he told me that he has letters written by General John Vessey, who commanded the artillerymen that morning. Vessey went to Vietnam years later and spoke to the commander of the 272nd VC Regiment which attacked FSB GOLD that morning. The Vietnamese commander told Vessey that he wished the decision to attack GOLD could have been taken back. They were destroyed as a fighting force for months after the engagement.

## **Gallant Yanks Grab Rifles and Stop Savage Attack Shell Blasts Send them in Action, Some to Heroes' Deaths**

*Chicago Tribune, Thursday, March 23, 1967*

(Here is the story of the valorous behavior of a detachment of American draftees engaged in their first battle in Vietnam and the heroism they displayed in reacting to the unusual demands made upon them).

LANDING ZONE GOLD, Vietnam, March 22 (UPI) – War is a place where a man has a cup of coffee at 6:20 a.m. and dies at 6:25.

You always expected to get shot at, and yet you never really expect it. So it was at the dawn of a dreary day yesterday in a dreary little place called Landing Zone Gold.

PFC Lawrence E. Melass of Freeport and Lake Jackson, Texas is only 20, but war saps the strength even of the young, and he was trying to grab a few extra minutes of sleep.

Sp. 4/c Gary L. Coburn, 20, of Redding O., wasn't as fortunate. He had to be up early, to begin brewing coffee for the 220 men of the 2d battalion, 77th artillery regiment, assigned to the 4th infantry division.

A few yards away, Sp. 4/c Raymond Riha, 21, of a Chicago suburb was bent over a helmet of cold water, gazing at his lathered face. He picked up his safety razor.

Behind them, an explosion broke the morning stillness. Then another, and another. Each was closer than the last.

His face still covered with shaving cream, Riha grabbed his rifle and dashed for cover. Coburn dropped his pots, picked up his rifle, and darted into a bunker.

The first explosion rolled Melass from his sack. Someone screamed, "medic, medic!" Larry Melass found his medical bag and dashed outside, into a hail of bullets...

### **First Mortar Kills Sergeant**

The time was 6:20 a.m. The battle of Landing Zone Gold had begun. Generals would later call it "one of America's greatest victories of the war," a battle fought near the Cambodian border, 75 miles north of Saigon.

But one United States sergeant who had been quietly sipping black coffee when the first mortar hit would never know it.

When Melass reached the scene of the first calls for help, he found three men sprawled out together. Two were still alive. The other was the sergeant. A mortar round had cut him in two.

War is a place that can bring out the worst in a man – and the best.

The young soldier had been in a bit of trouble only a month before, perhaps because he was so young. But as far as his company commander was concerned, “he was a natural-born leader”.

On this Tuesday he and 10 others crept quietly through the jungle brush on the outskirts of Landing Zone Gold. A shot rang out. The battle was on. Almost simultaneously, the first mortar rounds slammed into the artillery positions behind them.

Within minutes, Capt. James W. Shugart III, 27, of Fort Worth, knew what he had on his hands – a force of perhaps 2,500 Viet Cong troops, rushing toward the pitifully small, 420-man team of Americans at Landing Zone Gold.

Shugart desperately ordered the 11-man ambush patrol out in front to come back. Seven, somehow, made it through the blazing communist barrage and the counter-fire of 220 United States infantrymen and 200 artillerymen.

But the other four “refused to come back,” Shugart said. Instead, they lined up a machine gun and M-16 rifles and sought desperately to hold back the invaders, to give the men behind them a chance. All four died. One was the kid who had been in trouble, a “natural leader” who would never have the chance.

### **He Was Scared, but Heroic**

War is a place where a man lives from breath to breath sometimes in a strange, terrible loneliness. Sp. 4/c Richard Strebe, 20, of Waupaca, Wis., glanced over his machine gun at the open field in front of him, then behind him and to either side. He didn't believe what he saw.

“Waves... they were coming in waves,” he said. “They didn't care whether they got hit. They would get hit, and go back and get a bandage, and then come back at us again.

“I thought for a time the whole half of our position was gone. I can't even describe it...”

This was one of the Communists' finest, the Viet Cong's 272d regiment, on the move across the open fields of Landing Zone Gold. Some crouched and moved swiftly. Others crawled on their bellies around the crooks and turns of the water-gouged, foot-deep trenches that were now dry and sandy.

They attacked from the east and southeast, then the north, and northwest.

“They were coming in on all sides,” said Maj. Ralph F. James, 39, of Rockford, Ill., executive officer of the battalion. “There was about a 200-meter radius – and we were in the center.”

Coburn bemoaned the situation in a moment of grim humor. “They shot up my coffee pot,” he said. “They shot up everything.” The bespectacled cook took up his rifle and “kept firing and firing and firing.”

Riha, the shaving cream now washed away by sweat, dashed toward a bunker. "I got about halfway there, when I heard the bullets. I saw three of them, about 100 feet away. The infantry was falling back behind us. We were pinned down pretty good."

The noose was tightening rapidly against the tiny band of Americans. Now the communist troops were barely 25 yards from the battalion's big howitzers.

One man dashed up to Shugart. "I could see he was hit," the captain said.

"You're wounded," Shugart yelled over the roar.

"Gimme some more grenades," the soldier growled. "I'm going to get those s.o.b.'s"

A lieutenant colonel dashed from his bunker, grabbed an M-14 rifle and yelled, "Here I am, you little b\_\_\_. Come and get me." He blazed away at the mass of black-pajama clad figures closing in on him.

Still they came on – some carrying communist Chinese-made rifles so new the packing grease was still on them, others wearing cowboy hats and steel pots, all with glazed expressions that led Shugart and others to suspect the Viet Cong were "all hopped up on dope."

"They all had weird expressions on their faces," he said, "and it wasn't from fear."

Melass, meanwhile, darted about the shrinking United States bastion, caring first for a soldier who screamed, "I've been hit," comforting another who had been shot in the back. Larry Melass was scared. "Keep talking to me," he told one wounded man. "Just keep talking to me," he said as he bandaged the soldier.

"It's O.K.," the wounded man said softly. "You're going to be O.K."

Today one man after another stepped up and proudly shook Larry Melass' hand. "You did a great job," said one. "You were all over the place."

"I've never been so scared in my life," Melass replied.

Ammo Runs Low; Tanks Arrive

War is a place where truth is every bit as strange – and sometimes as wonderful – as fiction.

It was now going on three hours since the Viet Cong attacked. The men wondered how many minutes they had left. Ammunition was running low. The Communists were closer. A few positions had been overrun.

Strebe's machine gun was blasted from its mount. Melass kept up his medical work. Shugart was cut off from men – "they wrote me off."

Suddenly – for some unknown reason – the Communist attack slowed. Then, in the distance, a roar

– an unbelievable rumble. Across the charred trees, the gullies, the pools of blood came armed and armored personnel carriers. Then the tanks. Twenty... 40...74 in all, commanded by Lt. Col. Ralph W. Julian of Flandreau, S.D.

Their guns burped red, and the Viet Cong stopped, turned, terrified in their tracks. Some dashed for cover – and found none. The heavy vehicles rolled relentlessly over their bodies. Others grabbed at the vehicles, tried to climb up the sides. The Americans aboard calmly aimed rifles and shot them at point blank range.

“They weren’t running when we came in,” Julian said grimly, “but when they saw what was coming, they ran.”

It was quiet again, after four hours. Strebe looked around and shook his head in amazement.

“It’s an act of God we ever got out,” he said. “There were Viet Cong bodies, hundreds of bodies, piled up all over the place.”

Quiet and the stench of death hung over the scene of the battle of Landing Zone Gold today. That’s the sort of place war is.